

**Statement of
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Before the
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Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Highways, Transit, and Pipelines
Hearing on
“Rebuilding Highway and Transit Infrastructure
on the Gulf Coast following Hurricane Katrina”
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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Regional Transit Authority (RTA) of New Orleans and Jefferson Parish after Hurricane Katrina.

INTRODUCTION

Prior to Katrina, the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority, a political subdivision of the State of Louisiana, was considered a mid-sized transit system employing nearly 1300 people. We were the largest system in Louisiana and the largest between Houston on the west and Miami on the east, and Atlanta towards the north. We operated with 372 buses, 66 streetcars, and over 90 paratransit vehicles. Our operating budget for CY 2005 was set at \$111,218,000. The RTA averaged 124,000 riders per day on its 46 bus and three streetcar routes. Of the 855,000 people we carried weekly, over 20% were considered “transit dependent”, that is, they have no other way to get around to work, the doctor, shop, or school. And then Katrina came.

LANDFALL

Late during the day on Friday, August 26th, Hurricane Katrina’s projected path abruptly changed from going into the panhandle of Florida, towards the Louisiana/Mississippi border. The next day, RTA staff reported to City of New Orleans officials that it was prepared to carry out the City’s RTA hurricane plan that its Office of Emergency Preparedness was planning to implement. The RTA, in the meantime, as part of its own hurricane planning, fueled up all of its fleet based at its Eastern New Orleans facility and moved those buses not providing service to higher ground on a wharf near downtown New Orleans. Those buses that were providing regular service were also eventually moved to the wharf as well. The RTA would run regular service until conditions prohibited it due to safety considerations as described in the hurricane plan.

The other half of the fleet, based on Canal Street, was also in regular service but prepared to respond to the City’s needs. On Sunday morning, August 29th, per the City’s plan and request, the RTA began running special service from twelve (12) sites across the city to take riders to the Superdome, the “shelter of last resort”. In addition, the RTA also

ran at least ten (10) paratransit vehicles to the Superdome and then on to the Baton Rouge area for “special needs” citizens. Those vans made at least two trips. All service ceased at approximately 7:00PM Sunday night as Hurricane Katrina came in and conditions worsened. At that point a number of paratransit van operators were told to stay with their vans in Baton Rouge out of harm’s way while the remaining regular fleet, operators, a few essential administrators (me included), and their families based themselves at the A. Phillip Randolph facility on Canal Street to sit out the storm’s passing.

As the storm wracked Southeastern Louisiana and the Mississippi Gulf Coast during late Sunday and through Monday, it was apparent that the New Orleans area had taken a powerful hit, that all power was lost, communications crippled, trees and structures downed, but that it could have been a lot worse, and it did, in fact, become incredibly worse.

On Monday night, August 29th, as it appeared Katrina had finally passed, a report was received that a number of canals had been breached and major flooding had already begun in the City. What no one knew was how much or how extensive would be the flood, how fast it would flood, and despite many attempts, that the Army Corps of Engineers would be unable to plug up the breaches in time to slow the water. As water continued to rise around the RTA Canal Street facility, now trapping nearly two hundred and fifty people, the back-up generators failed and it became quite apparent that it would be necessary to evacuate the building. A task much easier said than done.

Using air mattresses and wading through unspeakable water, a group of about one hundred and fifty soon fled the building. They waded, or floated on air mattresses, for blocks until they found higher ground, an overpass. Soon, an employee was able to locate a small flat boat to evacuate the last of those stranded. Then came an arduous, difficult, lengthy, heart-breaking trip out of town to evacuation centers now finally being established in other parts of the state. Many of the RTA employees that served the City just hours before, evacuating those in need, themselves ended up in shelters in Baton Rouge and Baker, Louisiana. Many are now housed in trailer facilities in Baker, Louisiana. While we have not been able to determine the full extent, but through the information received to date, it is apparent that a vast majority of the RTA staff has either suffered extreme damage to their homes or has lost them and their personal belongings outright, as is my case. Unfortunately, we are also aware that one operator and his family, including his wife and two children, were lost at their home as floodwaters swept through their neighborhood. We also understand that several employees lost friends and relatives as well.

POST-STORM

Within days of the hurricane and the exodus to Baton Rouge, key RTA staff, once getting employees settled into shelters, set up temporary offices in Baton Rouge and at the offices of the Capital Area Transit System (CATS). FTA Region IV leadership quickly contacted us to reassure us that they would do everything they could to assist in RTA’s immediate recovery. I even received a call from Deputy Secretary Robert Jamison offering the same. From there the RTA executive staff located in Baton Rouge, with the

cooperation of CATS, FTA, FEMA and ESF1 officials, proceeded to plan for an immediate future that would ensure that there will be a New Orleans Regional Transit Authority after Katrina.

In addition, at my direction and already in place, staff took actions that will start to rebuild our transit system for a rebuilt New Orleans. I have reached out to the transit industry and have assembled a Strike Force Team to assess the damage to our facilities and buses. This 45-day effort will lead to the development of an action plan and priorities for the phased rebuild of our transit service and organization. This Strike Force Team will include representatives from NORTA, officials from other peer transit agencies, local area transportation agencies, local area planning experts and key business and community leaders. The Federal Transit Administration has already begun their review of the situation, prerequisite to the flow of funds that are becoming available to support this effort.

A brief overview of that damage includes:

- Administrative Offices @ Plaza Drive: Severe water and roof damage
- A. Phillip Randolph Bus Facility on Canal Street: Flooded first floor & maintenance bays, tools & related equipment.
- Canal Streetcar Storage, Inspection & Service Facility: Flooded first floor & maintenance bays, pits, tools, & related equipment.
- East New Orleans Bus Facility & Maintenance/Training Building: Severely flooded w/mud & mold in bays, pits and building. Tools & equipment severely impacted.
- Carrollton Streetcar Facility: Wind damage to doors and roof. Relatively minor.
- Entire fleet of 24 Canal Streetcars: Flooded – running gear inoperable.
- 6 of 7 Riverfront Streetcars: Flooded – running gear inoperable.
- 35 St. Charles Streetcars: Undamaged.
- Estimated 197 buses lost to flooding. Final count being determined. 80 stationed at Algiers Park & Ride another 50 based in Baton Rouge. Remaining fleet being recovered after use by National Guard, others.
- St. Charles Streetcar Catenary System: Severe wind damage.
- Canal Streetcar Catenary System: Wind damage appears repairable.
- Riverfront Streetcar Catenary System: Appears undamaged.
- Yet to be determined number of LIFT and Paratransit Vans damaged but many still operable.
- Numerous Service Vehicles, i.e. tow trucks, cherry pickers, vans, etc. severely flooded.

IMMEDIATE FUTURE

Our plans for the immediate future to overcome the greatest catastrophe in modern US history are pretty basic: restoration of service for our customers, reemployment of our staff, and the rebuild of our organization.

Our first goal, which I am happy to say is well underway, is the return to service for as many of our operable buses as possible as New Orleanians return to our city.

Thanks to a an Emergency Transportation Contract through FEMA and FTA, the RTA has partially restored 13 of its bus lines to service in New Orleans. More are planned, but we still do not have anything more than rough estimates of how much of the city will return to normal as the cleanup continues. However, we do plan to meet the demand as it arises, but housing for our employees is a huge hurdle we are working with FEMA to overcome.

Currently, employees are bused each day to their stations in New Orleans from Baton Rouge. Finally, we will need new buses but it is taking longer than anticipated to submit accurate estimates of how many, at this early stage of recovery.

As stated earlier, we are also very much concerned with getting our employees back to work earning a living once again and as soon as possible. We were able to retrieve our payroll servers from the Plaza Building in East New Orleans by helicopter immediately after the storm and issue a system wide payroll for the last weeks worked. After a month of no payroll for any of our employees, we have been able to pay some drivers and emergency administrative staff utilizing funds from an advance insurance payment and FEMA.

Our employees are now scattered all over Louisiana and in many cases the entire country. Our family of RTA employees number over 1300 and, because of their skills, they will be difficult to replace. We know that many have found jobs elsewhere, their children are in other schools, and are probably lost to the RTA for some time if not forever.

A major key to RTA's continued survival and recovery will be the return and stabilization to our revenue base. The great majority of our operating budget is funded through three sources, the farebox, a penny sales tax and the New Orleans hotel motel tax. Obviously, all three are academic for the moment, particularly at the levels needed to sustain the organization. As mentioned, we are presently operating FEMA sponsored service and, until tax revenue is restored, we will not be able to generate our normal income.

And this is where we can truly use the support of Congress, this Subcommittee and Committee. Just as it did for the New York MTA, we urge Congress to consider a number of policies being put forward by APTA and others in the industry to ensure the recovery of Gulf Coast transit systems:

- **Funding for "Investment Grants" to be distributed by FTA for capital and operating expenses, potentially from FEMA funds.**
- **Waive State & Local matching requirements for DOT /FTA assistance.**
- **Grant DOT/FTA the authority to enhance, as well as rebuild, the systems.**
- **Communicate the need to bring the "levy" system up to standards for Category 5 hurricane for our protection of life and property.**

But, in the meantime, we must continue the recovery of the RTA.

As you know, a good part of our streetcar infrastructure has been damaged. We are presently making assessments and preparing a rehabilitation plan for the damaged Canal Streetcars and track infrastructure. At this point some 30 Canal and Riverfront streetcars have sustained serious water damage. Two of those streetcars have been sent to Pennsylvania for a damage and rehabilitation assessment. We will be working to compile accurate damage costs and will submit them to this Committee as soon as they become available.

On a good note, there was little damage to the famous St. Charles Streetcar line other than to the overhead catenary system. Further good news is that FTA had already approved an extensive rehabilitation project for the St. Charles overhead electrical system and a contractor was preparing to get started when the storm hit. We are reevaluating the construction costs of the project and we are pushing to get the program underway as soon as possible while the system is closed. Construction on this project now should be far easier and may cost less than originally planned because there is no active service to work around. However, there is additional work required as the storm did more damage than the original work scope envisioned.

An assessment of bus damage is also underway and preliminary estimates are that approximately 200 transit buses may have been lost.

There are five RTA facilities and, with the exception of the Carrollton Barn, four sustained extensive damage. The lack of damage to the Carrollton Barn was fortunate. That is the site of the construction of the Canal Streetcars and we may be able to rehabilitate those damaged Canal Streetcars at Carrollton. It is also the storage facility for the irreplaceable St. Charles streetcars, all of which remain operable. We even hope to get the Riverfront Line back in operation soon.

The EPA has been of great assistance to us and has begun performing the cleanup of water damage at the Canal Street facility (A. Philip Randolph) to make it usable as a working facility. This cleanup process will take four weeks and will be completed by the end of the third week of November 2005. Our present plans are to return to New Orleans as soon as the EPA completes their environmental cleanup, if not sooner, and establish the Canal Street facility as our headquarters.

Of the other facilities, our present headquarters at Plaza Drive is extensively damaged by flooding and wind and may be a complete loss. The Napoleon Facility sustained heavy wind damage. The ENO, or East New Orleans, facility sustained water damage and the EPA cleanup operations will move on to ENO upon completion of their work at Canal Street.

Over the course of the past several weeks we have worked closely with the FTA and their PMO to compile an accurate early assessment of damage to work from in putting together our action plan. We do not have access to that report and are in the process of doing our own updated assessment at this time. We will submit our assessments to the committee as they are completed.

The RTA looks forward to working with federal, state, and local officials to plan a better and exciting New Orleans as envisioned and promised by those officials.

I would like to thank you Mr. Chairman and the members of the Committee for giving us the opportunity to update you on our progress in bringing transit services back to New Orleans.

If you have any questions I will be happy to answer them.

Attachments for the Committee:

Current RTA Update